SKIRNISMOL

The Ballad of Skirnir

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The *Skirnismol* is found complete in the *Codex Regius*, and through stanza 27 in the *Arnamagnæan Codex*. Snorri quotes the concluding stanza. In *Regius* the poem is entitled "For Scirnis" ("Skirnir's journey").

The *Skirnismol* differs sharply from the poems preceding it, in that it has a distinctly ballad quality. As a matter of fact, however, its verse is altogether dialogue, the narrative being supplied in the prose "links," concerning which cf. introductory note to the *Grimnismol*. The dramatic effectiveness and vivid characterization of the poem seem to connect it with the *Thrymskvitha*, and the two may possibly have been put into their present form by the same man. Bugge's guess that the Skirnismol was the work of the author of the *Lokasenna* is also possible, though it has less to support it.

Critics have generally agreed in dating the poem as we now have it as early as the first half of the tenth century; Finnur Jonsson puts it as early as goo, and claims it, as usual, for Nor way. Doubtless it was current in Norway, in one form or another, before the first Icelandic settlements, but his argument that the thistle (stanza 31) is not an Icelandic plant has little weight, for such curse-formulas must have traveled freely from place to place. In view of the evidence pointing to a western origin for many or all of the Eddic poems, Jonsson's reiterated "Digtet er sikkert norsk og ikke islandsk" is somewhat exasperating. Wherever the *Skirnismol* was composed, it has been preserved in exceptionally good condition, and seems to be practically devoid of interpolations or lacunæ.

Freyr, the son of Njorth, had sat one day in Hlithskjolf, and looked over all the worlds. He looked into Jotunheim, and saw there a fair maiden, as she went from her father's house to her bower. Forthwith he felt a mighty

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love-sickness. Skirnir was the name of Freyr's servant; Njorth bade him ask speech of Freyr. He said:

1. "Go now, Skirnir! | and seek to gain
Speech from my son;
And answer to win, | for whom the wise one
Is mightily moved."

Skirnir spake:
2. "Ill words do I now | await from thy son,
If I seek to get speech with him,
And answer to win, | for whom the wise one
Is mightily moved."

[*Prose*. *Freyr*: concerning his father, Njorth, and the race of the Wanes in general, cf. *Voluspo*, 21 and note. Snorri thus describes Njorth's family: "Njorth begat two children in Noatun; the son was named Freyr, and the daughter Freyja; they were fair of aspect and mighty. Freyr is the noblest of the gods; he rules over rain and sunshine, and therewith the fruitfulness of the earth; it is well to call upon him for plenty and welfare, for he rules over wealth for mankind. Freyja is the noblest of the goddesses. When she rides to the fight, she has one-half of the slain, and Othin has half. When she goes on a journey, she drives her two cats, and sits in a cart. Love-songs please her well, and it is good to call on her in love-matters." *Hlithskjolf*: Othin's watch-tower; cf. *Grimnismol*, introductory prose. *He said*: both manuscripts have "Then Skathi said:" (Skathi was Njorth's wife), but Bugge's emendation, based on Snorri's version, is doubtless correct.

1. *My son*: both manuscripts, and many editors, have "our son," which, of course, goes with the introduction of Skathi in the prose. As the stanza is clearly addressed to Skirnir, the change of pronouns seems justified. The same confusion occurs in stanza 2, where Skirnir in the manuscripts is made to speak of Freyr as {footnote p. 108}"your son" (plural). The plural pronoun in the original involves a metrical error, which is corrected by the emendation.]

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Skirnir spake:
3. "Speak prithee, Freyr, | foremost of the gods,
For now I fain would know;
Why sittest thou here | in the wide halls,
Days long, my prince, alone?"

Freyr spake:
4. "How shall I tell thee, | thou hero young,
Of all my grief so great?
Though every day | the elfbeam dawns,
It lights my longing never."

Skirnir spake:
5. "Thy longings, methinks, | are not so large
That thou mayst not tell them to me;
Since in days of yore | we were young together,
We two might each other trust."

Freyr spake:
6. "From Gymir's house | I beheld go forth
A maiden dear to me;
Her arms glittered, | and from their gleam
Shone all the sea and sky.

[4. Elfbeam: the sun, so called because its rays were fatal to elves and dwarfs; cf. *Alvissmol*, 35.

6. *Gymir*: a mountain-giant, husband of Aurbotha, and father of Gerth, fairest among women. This is all Snorri tells of him in his paraphrase of the story.

7. Snorri's paraphrase of the poem is sufficiently close so that his addition of another sentence to Freyr's speech makes it probable {footnote p. 110} that a stanza has dropped out between 7 and 8. This has been tentatively reconstructed, thus: "Hither to me shalt thou bring the maid, / And home shalt thou lead her here, / If her father wills it or wills it not, / And good reward shalt thou get." Finn Magnusen detected the probable omission of a stanza here as early as 1821.]

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7. "To me more dear | than in days of old
Was ever maiden to man;
But no one of gods | or elves will grant
That we both together should be."

Skirnir spake:
8. "Then give me the horse | that goes through the dark
And magic flickering flames;
And the sword as well | that fights of itself
Against the giants grim."

Freyr spake:
9. "The horse will I give thee | that goes through the dark
And magic flickering flames,
And the sword as well | that will fight of itself
If a worthy hero wields it."

[8. *The sword*: Freyr's gift of his sword to Skirnir eventually proves fatal, for at the last battle, when Freyr is attacked by Beli, whom he kills bare-handed, and later when the fire-demon, Surt, slays him in turn, he is weaponless; cf. *Voluspo*, 53 and note. *Against the giants grim*: the condition of this line makes it seem like an error in copying, and it is possible that it should be identical with the fourth line of the next stanza.]

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Skirnir spake to the horse:
10. "Dark is it without, | and I deem it time
To fare through the wild fells,
(To fare through the giants' fastness;)
We shall both come back, | or us both together
The terrible giant will take."

Skirnir rode into Jotunheim to Gymir's house. There were fierce dogs bound before the gate of the fence which was around Gerth's hall. He rode to where a herdsman sat on a hill, and said:

11. "Tell me, herdsman, | sitting on the hill,
And watching all the ways,
How may I win | a word with the maid
Past the hounds of Gymir here?"

The herdsman spake:
12. "Art thou doomed to die | or already dead,
Thou horseman that ridest hither?
Barred from speech | shalt thou ever be
With Gymir's daughter good."

Skirnir spake:
13. "Boldness is better | than plaints can be
For him whose feet must fare;

[10. Some editors reject line 3 as spurious.

12. Line 2 is in neither manuscript, and no gap is indicated. I have followed Grundtvig's conjectural emendation.

13. This stanza is almost exactly like many in the first part of {footnote p. 112} the *Hovamol*, and may well have been a separate proverb. After this stanza the scene shifts to the interior of the house.]

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To a destined day has mine age been doomed,
And my life's span thereto laid."

Gerth spake:
14. "What noise is that which now so loud
I hear within our house?
The ground shakes, and the home of Gymir
Around me trembles too."

The Serving-Maid spake:
15. "One stands without who has leapt from his steed,
And lets his horse loose to graze;"
. . . . . .
. . . . . .

Gerth spake:
16. "Bid the man come in, and drink good mead
Here within our hall;
Though this I fear, that there without
My brother's slayer stands.

[15. No gap indicated in either manuscript. Bugge and Niedner have attempted emendations, while Hildebrand suggests that the last two lines of stanza 14 are spurious, 14, 12, and 15 thus forming a single stanza, which seems doubtful.

16. *Brother's slayer*: perhaps the brother is Beli, slain by Freyr; the only other references are in *Voluspo*, 53, and in Snorri's paraphrase of the *Skirnismol*, which merely says that Freyr's gift of his sword to Skirnir "was the reason why he was weaponless when he met Beli, and he killed him bare-handed." Skirnir himself seems never to have killed anybody.]

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17. "Art thou of the elves | or the offspring of gods,
Or of the wise Wanes?
How camst thou alone | through the leaping flame
Thus to behold our home?"

Skirnir spake:
18. "I am not of the elves, | nor the offspring of gods,
Nor of the wise Wanes;
Though I came alone | through the leaping flame
Thus to behold thy home.

19. "Eleven apples, | all of gold,
Here will I give thee, Gerth,
To buy thy troth | that Freyr shall be
Deemed to be dearest to you."

Gerth spake:
20. "I will not take | at any man's wish
These eleven apples ever;
Nor shall Freyr and I | one dwelling find
So long as we two live."

Skirnir spake:
21. "Then do I bring thee | the ring that was burned

[17. *Wise Wanes*: Cf. *Voluspo*, 21 and note.

18. The *Arnamagnæan Codex* omits this stanza.

19. *Apples*: the apple was the symbol of fruitfulness, and also of eternal youth. According to Snorri, the goddess Ithun had charge of the apples which the gods ate whenever they felt themselves growing old.]

Of old with Othin's son;
From it do eight | of like weight fall
On every ninth night."

Gerth spake:
22. "The ring I wish not, | though burned it was
Of old with Othin's son;
In Gymir's home | is no lack of gold
In the wealth my father wields."

Skirnir spake:
23. "Seest thou, maiden, | this keen, bright sword
That I hold here in my hand?
Thy head from thy neck | shall I straightway hew,
If thou wilt not do my will."

Gerth spake:
24. "For no man's sake | will I ever suffer
To be thus moved by might;
But gladly, methinks, | will Gymir seek
To fight if he finds thee here."

Skirnir spake:
25. "Seest thou, maiden, | this keen, bright sword
That I hold here in my hand?

[21. *Ring*: the ring Draupnir ("Dropper") was made by the dwarfs for Othin, who laid it on Baldr's pyre when the latter's corpse was burned (Cf. *Voluspo*, 32 and note, and *Baldrs Draumar*). Baldr, however, sent the ring back to Othin from hell. How Freyr obtained it is nowhere stated. Andvari's ring (Andvaranaut) had a similar power of creating gold; cf. *Reginsmol*, prose {footnote p. 115} after stanza 4 and note. Lines 3 and 4 of this stanza, and the first two of stanza 22, are missing in the *Arnamagnæan Codex*.]

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Before its blade the | old giant bends,--
Thy father is doomed to die.

26. "I strike thee, maid, | with my magic staff,
To tame thee to work my will;
There shalt thou go | where never again
The sons of men shall see thee.

27. "On the eagle's hill | shalt thou ever sit,
And gaze on the gates of Hel;
More loathsome to thee | than the light-hued snake
To men, shall thy meat become.

28. "Fearful to see, | if thou comest forth,
Hrimnir will stand and stare,
(Men will marvel at thee;)

[25. The first two lines are abbreviated in both manuscripts.

26. With this stanza, bribes and threats having failed, Skirnir begins a curse which, by the power of his magic staff, is to fall on Gerth if she refuses Freyr.

27. *Eagle's hill*: the hill at the end of heaven, and consequently overlooking hell, where the giant Hræsvelg sits "in an eagle's guise," and makes the winds with his wings; cf. *Vafthruthnismol*, 37, also Voluspo, 50. The second line is faulty in both manuscripts; Hildebrand's emendation corrects the error, but omits an effective touch; the manuscript line may be rendered "And look and hanker for hell." The Arnamagnæan Codex breaks off with the fourth line of this stanza.

28. *Hrimnir*: a frost-giant, mentioned elsewhere only in *Hyndluljoth*, 33. Line 3 is probably spurious. *Watchman of the gods*: Heimdall; cf. *Voluspo*, 46.]

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More famed shalt thou grow | than the watchman of the gods!
Peer forth, then, from thy prison,

29. "Rage and longing, | fetters and wrath,
Tears and torment are thine;
Where thou sittest down | my doom is on thee
Of heavy heart
And double dole.

30. "In the giants' home | shall vile things harm thee
Each day with evil deeds;
Grief shalt thou get | instead of gladness,
And sorrow to suffer with tears.

31. "With three-headed giants | thou shalt dwell ever,
Or never know a husband;
(Let longing grip thee, | let wasting waste thee,--)

[29. Three nouns of doubtful meaning, which I have rendered *rage*, *longing*, and *heart* respectively, make the precise force of this stanza obscure. Niedner and Sijmons mark the entire stanza as interpolated, and Jonsson rejects line 5.

30. In *Regius* and in nearly all the editions the first two lines of this stanza are followed by lines 3-5 of stanza 35. I have followed Niedner, Sijmons, and Gering. The two words here translated *vile things* are obscure; Gering renders the phrase simply "Kobolde."

31. The confusion noted as to the preceding stanza, and a metrical error in the third line, have led to various rearrangements and emendations; line 3 certainly looks like an interpolation. *Three-headed giants*: concerning giants with numerous heads, cf. *Vafthruthnismol*, 33, and *Hymiskvitha*, 8.]

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Be like to the thistle | that in the loft
Was cast and there was crushed.

32. "I go to the wood, | and to the wet forest,
To win a magic wand;
. . . .
I won a magic wand.

33. "Othin grows angry, | angered is the best of the gods,
Freyr shall be thy foe,
Most evil maid, | who the magic wrath
Of gods hast got for thyself.

34. "Give heed, frost-rulers, | hear it, giants.
Sons of Suttung,
And gods, ye too,
How I forbid | and how I ban
The meeting of men with the maid,
(The joy of men with the maid.)

[32. No gap indicated in the manuscript; Niedner makes the line here given as 4 the first half of line 3, and fills out the stanza thus: "with which I will tame you, / Maid, to work my will." The whole stanza seems to be either interpolated or out of place; it would fit better after stanza 25.

33. Jonsson marks this stanza as interpolated. The word translated *most evil* is another case of guesswork.

34. Most editors reject line 3 as spurious, and some also reject line 6. Lines 2 and 3 may have been expanded out of a single line running approximately "Ye gods and Suttung's sons." *Suttung*: concerning this giant cf. Hovamol, 104 and note.]

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35. "Hrimgrimnir is he, | the giant who shall have thee
In the depth by the doors of Hel;
To the frost-giants' halls | each day shalt thou fare,
Crawling and craving in vain,
(Crawling and having no hope.)

36. "Base wretches there | by the root of the tree
Will hold for thee horns of filth;
A fairer drink | shalt thou never find,
Maid, to meet thy wish,
(Maid, to meet my wish.)

37. "I write thee a charm | and three runes therewith,
Longing and madness and lust;

But what I have writ | I may yet unwrite
If I find a need therefor."

[35. Most editors combine lines 1-2 with stanza 36 (either with the first two lines thereof or the whole stanza), as lines 3-5 stand in the manuscript after line 2 of stanza 30. *Hrimgrimnir* ("The Frost-Shrouded"): a giant not elsewhere mentioned. Line 5, as a repetition of line 4, is probably a later addition.

36. For the combination of this stanza with the preceding one, cf. note on stanza 35. The scribe clearly did not consider that the stanza began with line I, as the first word thereof in the manuscript does not begin with a capital letter and has no period before it. The first word of line 3, however, is so marked. Line 5 may well be spurious.

37. Again the scribe seems to have been uncertain as to the stanza divisions. This time the first line is preceded by a period, but begins with a small letter. Many editors have made line 2 {footnote p. 119} into two half-lines. *A charm*: literally, the rune Thurs (b); the runic letters all had magic attributes; cf. *Sigrdrifumol*, 6-7 and notes.]

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Gerth spake:
38. "Find welcome rather, | and with it take
The frost-cup filled with mead;
Though I did not believe | that I should so love
Ever one of the Wanes."

Skirnir spake:
39. "My tidings all | must I truly learn
Ere homeward hence I ride:
How soon thou wilt | with the mighty son
Of Njorth a meeting make."

Gerth spake:
40. Barri there is, | which we both know well,
A forest fair and still;
And nine nights hence | to the son of Njorth
Will Gerth there grant delight."

Then Skirnir rode home. Freyr stood without, and spoke to him, and asked for tidings:

41. "Tell me, Skimir, | ere thou take off the saddle,
Or farest forward a step:
What hast thou done | in the giants' dwelling
To make glad thee or me?"

[40. Barri: "The Leafy."]

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Skirnir spoke:
42. "Barri there is, | which we both know well,
A forest fair and still;
And nine nights hence | to the son of Njorth
Will Gerth there grant delight."

Freyr spake:
43. "Long is one night, | longer are two;
How then shall I bear three?
Often to me | has a month seemed less
Than now half a night of desire."

[42. Abbreviated to initial letters in the manuscript.

43. The superscription is lacking in *Regius*. Snorri quotes this one stanza in his prose paraphrase, *Gylfaginning*, chapter 37 The two versions are substantially the same, except that Snorri makes the first line read, "Long is one night, long is the second."]

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